



by Karen Stephens

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Adjustment: Life Changes are “Teachable Moments” for Kids

It's a truism we'll never escape. From one minute to the next, nothing stays the same. And in case you haven't noticed, this especially applies to children! Changes in children's behavior and life in general vary from one developmental stage to another. Whatever the change, it often creates emotional stress for child and parent alike.

But change in and of itself isn't necessarily bad — or even hard on children. In fact, some change keeps family life interesting. And it exposes children to broader experiences and encourages new skills and abilities.

Sheltering children from all change is a disservice. At some point they'll have to cope with all the world dishes out: the good, the bad, and the ugly. And they'll have to do it on their own. We must prepare children for a real life of change, not a Utopian world of artificial stability and sameness. Certainly parents should limit the number of changes children are required to endure and adapt to all at once. But it's useless — and unwise — to try to eliminate them.

There are many developmentally-appropriate changes children must navigate. As they successfully adjust to manageable changes, children mature and develop increased self-confidence and self-esteem.

For instance, when infants are first expected to sit or play alone for a while, they can experience quite a shock. Learning to use the toilet is a very rude awakening for children who like the convenience of diapers. All those changes are desirable for children to experience. The temporary stress endured during the change brings a huge pay off.

In most circumstances, adjusting to change helps children establish a clearer sense of identity and personal strength. They develop greater self-control, self-respect, independence, discipline. And they become more self-aware.

Daily family living presents an endless array of teachable moments for children's coping skills. Following are examples (be warned, some of these changes are very sad, and very real):

- adjusting to a new member in the family or classroom
- new neighbor moves next door
- family moves to a new home
- well-child doctor and dentist check-up
- a sibling goes to grade school or moves away to college
- continuous changes in caregiver, child care arrangements, or living arrangements
- loss of friends or neighbors; move of a much-loved extended family member
- parent separation or divorce; loss of another significant relationship, such as grandparents; court disputes or changes in child visitation arrangements
- change in parents' regular work schedules
- change in parents' employment or economic resources and status
- chronic illness, injury, or death of a family member or family pet
- parent's re-marriage and introduction of step-parent and step-siblings
- living with mood swings of an untreated mentally ill or drug-dependent parent or sibling

- witnessing violence in the home, neighborhood, child care, or school
- enduring natural disasters
- facing chronic hospitalization or surgery
- abuse or neglect of any kind

Ironically, even positive life changes can temporarily cause children some stress. These include:

- having a birthday or holiday party
- going on a vacation
- attending a child care or school function
- going on a field trip or having a special visitor in the classroom
- attending a family reunion
- rites of passage such as entering kindergarten, high school, and college

As common sense infers, how children face and adjust to these changes varies according to age, inborn temperament, personality, and experience. The first critical challenge parents face is recognizing when children need extra emotional support for whatever change they face. Only then can parents put extra effort into modeling and nurturing positive and wise coping skills.

Unfortunately, it's often hard or uncomfortable for children to ask for help, even if they are old enough to talk. So parents must look for children's behavior cues. In very stressful times, children's behavior literally becomes their cry for help. When it rings out, parents have an obligation to listen . . . with their eyes and their ears.

Children having trouble coping with change may become testy, combative, unruly, cranky, whiny, withdrawn, or simply fatigued. They may sleep or eat much more — or much less — than usual. Stress-related illnesses, such as colds or migraines, increase, as will stress-related habits, such as nail biting, hair twirling, eyelash pulling, or unrelenting masturbation. School-age children may show a drop in school or athletic performance.

Children consistently overwhelmed by too frequent or too harmful change begin to feel trampled by life. They quickly abdicate responsibility. Gradually they give up more and more self-control and accountability. In the process, they become susceptible to peer pressure which sometimes (often!) opposes their family's values or code of ethics.

Overly stressed children may also turn to destructive, counter-productive methods of coping. Strategies may include self-hatred and depression, aggressive behavior — and yes, passive-aggressive behavior, too. As early as the early elementary school years, stressed children may try to calm themselves by escaping through alcohol or drugs, engaging in premature sexual activity, committing random vandalism or violence, or threatening suicide.

Steps Parents Can Take

Parents can help children by allowing them to experience developmentally appropriate changes. At the same time, parents must work to limit the severity and frequency of harmful changes children are expected to live through. Parents should be emotionally responsive and supportive whenever children face change. When changes are very big or complex enough to jeopardize children's emotional health, parents can turn to experienced family members and local children's therapists for assistance. That can be hard, but when parents cope with stress well, and children learn to do the same, families become closer, stronger, and more stable. That's a goal worth achieving.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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